THE MUSLIM WOMAN'S DRESS

According to The Qur'an and Sunnah

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"And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands..."

(Surat-un-Nur 24:31)



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Requirements in Dress

The First Requirement
Extent of Covering

The dress must cover the whole body except the areas specifically exempted. The Qur'an states:

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do.
And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers, or their brother's sons, or their women, or their slaves whom their right hand possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you believers! Turn all toward Allah that you may attain bliss." (Surat-un-Nur 24:30-31)

These 'ayahs contain, among other things, two main injunctions:
1. A Muslim woman should not display her beauty and adornment (zeenah) except for 'that which must ordinarily appear of it': (ma dhahara minha), or 'that which is apparent.'

The word zeenah lends itself to two related meanings:
a) natural or bodily beauty, and; b) acquired adornment such as a ring, bracelet's, and clothes.

The part of zeenah, exempted from the above injunction, was interpreted in two ways:
a. The face and the hands. This is the interpretation of the majority of the jurists, past and present. This interpretation is confirmed by ijma (consensus) that a Muslim woman is allowed by Islam to uncover her face and hands during pilgrimage and even during the prayers, while the rest of her body is regarded as 'awrah (that which should be covered). This interpretation is based on the authority of Prophet Muhammad (Allah's blessings be upon him), especially the hadith in which he says:

"'...If a woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen but this' - and he pointed to his face and hands."

b. Whatever appears of the woman's body owing to uncontrollable factors such as blowing of the wind, or out of necessity such as the bracelet's or even the outer clothes themselves.

2. The headcovers (khumur) should be drawn over the neck slits (juyoob), khumur is the plural of the Arabic word “khimar” which means a headcover. Juyoob is the plural of the Arabic word “jaiyb” (a derivative of jawb or cutting) refers to the neck slit (of the dress). This means that the headcover should be drawn so as to cover not only the hair, but it should also be drawn over the neck and be extended so as to cover the bosom.

The Second Requirement
Looseness

The dress must be loose enough so as not to describe the shape of a woman’s body. This is consistent with the intent of the ; ’Ayahs cited above (24:30-31) and is surely a crucial aspect of hiding zeenah. Even moderately - tight clothes which cover the whole body do describe the shape of the attractive parts of the woman’s bustline, the waist, the buttocks, the back and the thighs. If these are not part of the natural beauty or zeenah what else is?

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once received a thick garment as a gift. He gave it to Osamah b. Zayd, who in turn gave it to his wife. When asked by the Prophet why he did not wear it, Osamah indicated that he gave it to his wife. The Prophet then said to Osamah “ask her to use a gholalah under it (the garment) for I fear that it (the garment) may describe the size of her bones.”

A highly desirable way of concealing the shape of the body is to wear a cloak over that garment. The prophet (peace be upon him), however, indicated that if the woman’s dress meets the Islamic standards it suffices (without a cloak) even for the validity of prayers.

The Third Requirement
Thickness

The dress should be thick enough so as not to show the colour of the skin it covers, or the shape of the body which it is supposed to hide.

The purpose of ‘ayah (24:31) is to hide the Muslim women’s body except ma dhahara minha (the face and hands). It is obvious that this purpose cannot be served if the dress is thin enough so as to reveal the colour of the skin or the shape or beauty of the body. This eloquently explained by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

“In later (generations) of my ummah there will be women who will be dressed but naked. On the top of their heads (what looks) like camel humps. Curse them for they are truly cursed.” In another version he added that they “will not enter into paradise or (even) get a smell of it.”

On one occasion Asma’ (daughter of Abu Bakr) was visiting her sister ‘A’ishah, wife of the Prophet. When the prophet (peace be upon him) noted that Asma’s dress was not thick enough he turned his face away in anger and said,

"If the woman reaches the age of puberty, no part of her body should be seen, but this," and he pointed to his face and hands.

The Fourth Requirement
Overall Appearance

The dress should not be such that it attracts men's attention to the woman's beauty. The Qur'an clearly prescribes the requirements of the woman's dress for the purpose of concealing zeenah (adornment). How could such zeenah be concealed if the dress is designd in a way that it attracts men's eyes to the woman?

This is why the Qur'an addressing the Prophet's wives as the examples for the Muslim women says:
"Bedizen not yourself with the bedizenment of the Time of Ignorance..." (Surat al-Ahzab 33:33)

Additional Requirements

In addition to the above four main and clearly spelled out requirements, there are other requirements whose specific applications may vary with time and location.

These include:
1. The dress should not be similar to what is known as a male costume. Ibn 'Abbas narrated that:

"The Prophet cursed the men who acted like women and women who acted like men."

2. It should not be similar to what is known as the costume of disbelievers. This requirement is derived from the general rule of Shari'ah that Muslims should have their distinct personality and should differentiate their practices and appearances from unbelievers.

3. It should not be a dress of fame, pride and vanity. Such fame may be sought by wearing an excessively fancy dress as a status symbol or an excessively ragged dress to gain others' admiration of one's selfishness. Both motives are improper by Islamic standards. The Prophet (peace be upon him) says:

"Whoever wears a dress of fame in this world, Allah will clothe him with a dress of humiliation on the Day of Resurrection, then set set it on fire."